

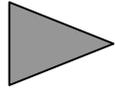
ADVERTISING AS A MEANS OF MOULDING
SOCIAL STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

Commercials – entertainment, business or something more? “A means of moulding social stereotypes” seems a formula a little too pretentious. This paper appeared because at one point I was struck by the commercials’ power to intrude in people’s choices and to strengthen their preconceived ideas or social stereotypes. The recurrent theme that I noticed is related mainly to household products and the idea of marriage where advertisers felt like it was necessary to focus on the woman’s wedding ring (it is always the woman), especially when there are some kids involved. The point I want to make here is that it is not the advertisers’ role to mould or strengthen social or religious morale: they need to promote a product, not social behaviour or personal choice.

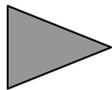
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Introduction

Living in a world of advertisements and commercials, we have become so accustomed to them that, we might think, we could no longer “live” without them. However, although they have become part of our lives, we should not forget that they are not just an innocent, sometimes pleasant or funny or, why not, boring means of information about products or services which we might need ... or not.

A discussion on advertising may start by stating which advertisements we like most and which are those that we like least; this is one of the warm-up activities that teachers employ when they approach this topic in class. However, when we are about to interpret advertisements, we should not focus our attention on the beauty of the commercial (beautiful, seductive images, pleasant musical background), as advertising is not merely a matter of liking and disliking, but one of communicating messages that lie behind images or words.



Regulating advertising

There are various websites that give examples of and explanations on advertising. One of them even presents a *Code of laws* meant to regulate publicity. The authors of the site make the difference between advertisements that offend the Code of laws, advertisements which they reject, and commercials “that you may not personally like” because of the characters that appear in those commercials. The same voices insist that when some advertisements are criticized for being offensive, this is just a matter of taste:

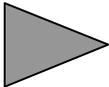
There is an important difference between advertisements which offend against the Codes and advertisements that you may not personally like. A personality advertising a particular product on TV may get on your nerves – especially if you watch a lot of television and see the commercial repeatedly – but that is no reason for complaining. No harm has been done, because you are unlikely to be persuaded to buy a product by someone you dislike. In general, we take notice only of those advertisements that appeal to us in some way. Personal taste comes into the way

we look at advertising just as it does into our response to a photograph, a newspaper article, a film, a book, or a piece of music. (1)

On purpose or not, the statement above is at least pervasive if not simplistic, as it is reduced to only that “matter of taste” which I have already mentioned and which does not represent the measure of interpreting a commercial in terms of “offensive” or “not offensive”. A commercial may be perceived by the viewers as being offensive when they sense some unfair detail in that particular ad. To put it straight, (smart) viewers understand when a commercial “offends” certain “categories” of people.

We are aware of the fact that ads may dupe us a little and we take it for granted, it comes with the territory, but only to a certain extent. People involved in advertising talk about the “ethical questions” (2) of advertising, focusing on problems such as: does advertising increase prices or not? is it tasteless, vulgar or not? does it exploit consumers by creating unnecessary needs or not?

In my opinion, the ethical question is none of the above-mentioned but it deals more with the imposition of a choice (*the* choice) on customers rather than with the creation of a variety of choices, as some advertisements play upon more or less delicate social issues which lie beneath the surface.



The stereotypical world of ads

Although the common message that all advertisements send, which is also the easiest to be guessed when students (and not only them) are asked to interpret them, is “go and buy this product”, there is, almost every time, a second message, a message that needs to be decoded. This complementary message is exactly the one that turns the advertisement from a common means of information directed towards the consumer into a symbolic means of reinforcing cultural and social stereotypes, all encompassed in a fantasy world more often than not impossible to attain in reality, a world that we, consumers, want to imitate.

The world of advertisements, whether the background is the city or the countryside, is a perfect and safe world. Indeed, since the producer’s objective is to sell, the advertiser cannot risk showing images that would disturb the viewer (read

consumer); moreover, it has become common practice to try to find the appropriate way to seduce the consumer by presenting a world which is superior in beauty to the one in which the viewer/ listener actually lives.

Yet, commercials have become too powerful, being capable of duping the consumer into believing that s/he has a choice when, in fact, s/he is left without a one. What is presented in the media, especially on TV, establishes or reinforces certain norms. One must necessarily buy a certain type of shampoo or of toothpaste, otherwise one is not “modern” or “fashionable” enough, meaning that one is not well-informed, one is not part of “our” group. When one talks about norms, one makes the difference between “us” and “them”: “us” – the best, those who know and use the product, and “them” – the inferior group, those who have not heard about the product or those who are so careless about themselves that they are not curious enough to try it out. The “correct” or the only acceptable answer in such situations is “yes, I accept”. Advertising is therefore a means of manipulation through lack of choice and eventually of freedom of choice: the consumer no longer has the freedom to choose what s/he wants, s/he becomes *un-free*, in other words the consumer is *free not to choose* what s/he is offered; saying “no” automatically turns the consumer into one of “them”.

The group is understood here as something more than just the customer target. The target is only a category of people characterized by a certain age, class, gender, religion, behaviour, lifestyle and profession; these are characteristics that do not offend, they are factors that advertisers need to take into account in order to come to a good end. I will not argue against this but I will express my disagreement with the fact that *the category is transformed into an elitist group which turns the non-loyal customer into an intruder or a lesser person*. “Not like us” becomes “less than us”, without “them” even realizing it as “they” did not have the opportunity to choose. In other words, “they” have to become “us”, otherwise they will always stay “them” or “the other”.

The “underground” message that most commercials contain, i.e. what lies beneath the surface, is the following: we offer you the best because *you* are the best (or because “you deserve it”), therefore you do not need to buy something that does not reflect your “superior” personality.

Indeed, we are all “special” and “superior”, “simply the best”, in advertisements, but only as long as we are loyal to a certain brand. Remember the commercial for a

mobile telephony company and its services (Zapp Share Free)? The idea of belonging to a particular group (which is understood as an elitist group) is very well reflected here, although we have to admit that the services advertised in the above-mentioned commercial are indeed directed towards a very clear target, so it does not dupe anybody.

Being part of the elite you are of a kind, special, worthy of admiration, not thanks to your in-born qualities but because you are willing or clever enough to use a certain product or service. The difference between “us” and “them” is usually visually illustrated through images presented in parallel – one character (or group of characters) on the left, the other on the right of the screen (usually the “good” character appears on the right), or in black-and-white to illustrate the DON'Ts (“them”) and then in colours to illustrate the DOs (“us”). An illustrative example is the commercial for *Blend-a-med* (“Flat no.10” and “Flat no.9”), in which love is interpreted in point of the two couples’ choice of toothpaste.

The image of a perfect world reflected in commercials influences the consumer up to a point when s/he believes that this is the way in which things should stand – the norm. Although, at first sight, the viewer-consumer overlooks the underneath message, as s/he is under the spell of the surface message and of the seductive images and offers displayed at his/her feet, everything is carefully presented in commercials, each detail is carefully chosen and depicted: the way the characters are dressed, their haircut, the way they talk (the speed of delivery of the message, the level of formality, the stress), their gestures, the exterior and the interior or their houses, the relationships between them (which are more often than not perfect, except for those situations in which one group or one individual is superior to another group or individual, and in this case they are presented in parallel in order for the viewer to actually *see* the difference).

Apart from the difference “us”/“them”, commercials contain other recurrent themes meant to mould social stereotypes and consumer choice. Among them, one may notice the *idea of a perfect home* which induces a feeling of tranquillity, ease and comfort. Advertisers know that this is an aspect that most of us lack, and therefore need: free time or carelessness. The speed with which we live our lives is compensated in commercials by presenting almost the opposite of what we really live. This practice is not accidental: advertisers take advantage of what we lack or need making it available for us through images, through something which is

immaterial but which encourages us to believe that it really exists in the advertised product. The latter is not only made of specific ingredients and materials but it also contains a part of the illusion, of the imaginary, perfect, or at least improved version of life, the one we yearn for. There are many (if not all) commercials which present a distorted version of reality. The series of commercials for *Dero* whose main character is Aunty Maria presents a perfectly clean and elegant Romanian country house, equipped with all the utilities, which stands in great discrepancy with the majority of Romanian country houses. Another commercial, for *Orange*, played in 2004-2005, contains the following message: when you use our services, we want you to feel comfortable, so this is what we are offering you. The same idea pervades the whole commercial: the character (male) takes delight in spending a tranquil (probably Sunday) morning at home, in his modern and welcoming living-room. The colours of the pieces of furniture in the room and of the character's clothes are very mild and peaceful. The camera even focuses, at a certain point, on his slippers (idea of warmth and comfort) as the man is lying on the couch: he is so tranquil and at peace with himself that nothing could disturb him, not even when he discovers his pet urinating on his morning paper.

Another issue that is related to advertising and to the idea of a perfect home is the *influence of commercials on children*. Apart from the education received at home, children are influenced by advertisements into believing in a set of values which have been previously established by society. Watching a commercial is similar to learning a lesson. The lesson that they learn from TV is more efficient than the one imposed by their teachers and parents because appealing images and sounds make the lesson easier and more attractive than a traditional one. Instead of the parents' and teachers' dos and don'ts, commercials adopt the pattern of "you should" or "it would be better for you to" or "if you act like this you will become more successful".

In fact, most of the times commercials present a fake perfect world which the child, without realizing, takes for granted only to discover later on that things could be a lot different. When it comes to children, advertisements are not a means of offering information (although the parent's perception may be this): what interests the children, particularly the little ones, is not the size, the flavour or fragrance of the product, its price or its qualities, but the story around the product. Up to a certain age s/he might not even be interested in the product at all but in the details taken by the camera.

The equation of a perfect family in commercials would look like this:

[1 *married* mother + 1 father + (at least) 1 child + (sometimes) 1 pet (usually a dog)] + 1 beautiful and welcoming house = the perfect family

Among the examples that illustrate this equation I want to mention two commercials. The first one, for cooking oil (*Floriol*), in which the parents prepare dinner together with their child (activity that turns into some kind of family party); the second one is the commercial for *Elite* (mother and father are playing with their baby), commercial which has been followed by another one, a promotional campaign for the same product, in which the members of a family are presented having lots of fun in their own house (the prize of the winner consisting precisely in a real house). The equation is also perfectly illustrated in a video for one of singer Pink's songs: a little girl watches a commercial for milk every day, over and over again; this does not happen because she likes milk (idea of comfort and security) very much, but because she is fascinated by the image of the perfect family presented in the commercial (mother, father and the children have gathered around the dinner table; they talk and laugh and seem to enjoy one another's company). This image captivates the little girl as it is totally opposed to her own family (her mother and father are always falling out). In the end, the little girl gives up her real family and becomes a new member of the virtual family, thus rejecting reality and taking refuge in a world and a family that in fact do not exist.

The third issue very often illustrated in commercials, being always related to women (as women represent the majority of consumers for most products), is that of *differences and power relations in ads*. There are differences in point of social status or in point of wealth. The advertiser uses visual detail that suggests this difference. An example in this respect is a commercial for the detergent *Rex*. There are two women in the commercial: one with a child (suggesting that she is not career-oriented), wearing very colourful clothes, with blond curly somewhat wild hair, playing the middle-class housewife who cannot afford to buy expensive products; the other woman appears alone (she is probably career-oriented), wearing mild-coloured clothes and a conservative haircut (she wears her hair in a simple bun), telling the potential customers in a very warm voice that she uses expensive products because cleanliness is very important for her family. The way the two women are presented clearly shows that the ad categorizes women, reinforcing the

old belief that mothers cannot be career women and, as a result, cannot spend too much, and that career women do not have children but can afford to buy “the best”.

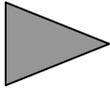
In point of gender discrimination, there are lots of elucidatory commercials, usually for household products. Most commercials preserve the misogynist theory according to which the woman belongs to the domestic sphere, so it is always the woman who does the work in the house. Women are most of the times in competition over the best products, those that generate the fastest results. The irony of the situation is that the merit for being the fastest is not entirely the winner's but of some extraordinary being that embodies the brand. Such a being is *Mr. Muscolo* or *Mr. Proper*. Still, they are called “Mr.”, not “Mrs.”, and it is them who do the work *intelligently*, without rubbing and scratching. Thus, the woman, unable to find a solution to make her job easier, is glad to get advice from a male.

In other commercials, the one who does the dirty job is the man. Yet, he does not have to work too much, if at all, because *Mr. Muscolo* or *Pur* come to his help. In this case, the man wants to prove that he helps his wife with the housework, but since it is not in his nature to perform such an activity, he gets help from another male, thus building a special relationship (men's friendship against their wives' “unnatural” requests).

Matrimony or *the mistress of the ring* is another important theme in commercials. The examples I will refer to are commercials for detergents, too. While the background voice tells the story of the detergent – its advantages and characteristics – all of a sudden, for just a second, the camera focuses on the woman's wedding ring. Well, why would the director of the commercial pay attention to this tiny detail? Would it be because s/he pays a huge respect to the institution of marriage or maybe because s/he wants to show that only (house) wives, not unmarried women, have to do the washing or the washing-up? Let us get another clue: *the mistress of the ring* is almost every time accompanied by a child. What would be the message that we can gather from this? I for one believe that the message says that a mother is absolutely necessary a *mistress of the ring*. There are no single mothers in commercials. This message is abusive since we no longer live in world where single mothers have to bear the letter ‘A’, from ‘adulteress’, on their chests.

Moreover, according to social stereotypes, unmarried women cannot be mothers; they are sexy, powerful women, who can play tricks on or even subdue men. Yet, I can mention an exception to this stereotype which is meant to prove that things are changing to the right direction. I am referring to the commercial for the perfume for men *Dare*. Here the woman is married (we can tell from what happens in the commercial as we are not shown any ring) and cheats on her husband (!). The lack of the image with the ring is like a punishment for the woman: she does not deserve to be a *mistress of the ring*, she does not cook or clean for her husband, she only cheats on him! And who do you think is the “daring” one in the end? It is the other man, of course.

The last theme I want to refer to is *the woman as intruder*. Men complain about women intruding in their personal space and they have found a way to express it in commercials. In one of them, for a web site (www.cossacks.com), bearing the slogan “the art of war” (the “war” between men and women), a man is presented sitting alone in front of the computer; a woman (probably his girlfriend/ wife) enters the room and pats the man’s shoulder as if telling him that she sympathizes with him for we do not know what reason, he acknowledges the gesture, but the next thing he does is pressing a key on the keyboard; something that looks like a big log begins to swing and propels the woman outside, through the window. Another illustrative commercial is the one for *Ziarul financiar* in which a man and a woman sit at different tables in a restaurant. The man looks intently at the woman while holding a newspaper in his hands; the woman also shows interest in the man, she stands up from her table, walks to him and writes her telephone number on the newspaper. What is the man’s reaction? Many of us would think he is thrilled. Well, actually no, he is quite upset as we can see him slapping the woman with the newspaper. Interpretation: beware of the man, do not abuse his space and you will not get slapped. The commercial for the *Yellow Pages* sends a similar message: the woman could be so annoying that the man would simply like her to disappear ...or even die (characters: wife and husband; wife is talking, complaining, almost screaming; man is looking through the yellow pages looking for something; finally, yes, he has found what he has been looking for: guns.)



Conclusion

Whether we *like* it or not, advertising is part of our reality, at the same time fascinating and obsessive. We may be influenced by it or not, we may perceive it in various ways, still we must realize that advertising is not just something close to art (because it involves a lot of creativity) but it also plays an important part in the economy of a country, and, most importantly, in my opinion, leaving aside the fact that many commercials are really funny and intelligently made, let us not forget that it is an important and subversive factor in the modelling of social norms and preferences.



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Iulia Rășcanu is an Assistant Lecturer in Business English and Professional Communication at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest. She graduated from the University of Bucharest, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and she holds a Master's degree in American Studies from the same University, 2002. She wrote and published a series of papers for different conferences, among which *Advertising as an Incentive for Students*, *ESP –English for Engineers*, *Female Identity. Woman as the Other in Black Female Writing (Toni Morrison's novels)*, *Blogging – The Ultimate form of Communication?* Also, she co-authored two text books for ASE students: *First Steps into Marketing* și *English for Marketing Students*.